IX

FAMINE DEATH WITHOUT LOSS OF HONOUR IN ANCIENT ARABIA AND YEMENI ARḤAB

On 6 December 1966, with Muḥammad al-'Ubaydī, son of the *naqīb* of Shākir, as leader of my escort, I went to Sūdah in Arḥab, a black lava mountain, the place belonging to 'Iyāl al-Siḥaym. We had passed by Jabal al-Riyām and Ṣirwāḥ. The tomb of Ṣāliḥ [1] was on the north side, a domed building. This tomb had, or used to have, *'ushūr*, tithes paid to it. In the houses which were on the south side there was only one man, the rest of the villagers being women. The men were away at the war or perhaps employed in Ṣan'ā'. Water was short here and I believe (though this is not in my notes) brought from quite some distance. Sūdah had the look of a hungry place. Yet in the area there was much drawing on the rocks, some quite recent, including a Hebrew graffito which too had the appearance of being recently made, and it seems that Jews used at one time to live here.

In the open country we saw a number of *ma'fadas*, mass graves of people buried together according to Ṣāliḥ, one of the tribal escort. There was no visible sign of these graves though I recall some rocks in the ground—the place was memorable for me as my mule threw me in an unguarded moment on the hard, gritty ground! Ṣāliḥ gave me further particulars which I did not record in my field-book as I noted that 'there is no reason to believe this', but I was wrong. So I have to rely on my memory for what he told me. This was that in the time of famine, when there was no food left, or possibility of obtaining food, the tribesfolk, men and women, would collect together and sit down in a circle and wait for death—I think he said that they put on their finest clothes and jewellery. It was a matter of honour for the tribe that they should not beg for food.

When I showed the late Professor Maḥmūd al-Ghūl this word *ma'fada*, strange to me, he at once recognized its significance and referred me to the lexicons. There is also a quotation in the *Ghāyat al-amānī*: [2]

> Al-Hamdānī said: 'Most of the Āl Abi 'l-Jaysh perished in the drought (*ḥuṭma*[3]) of 290/903 after their monies (*amwāl*) were exhausted and their chiefs had given unstintingly because of the problem. So they sat in their houses and locked their doors until they died. Only one small infant girl of them survived whom some of the Banu 'l-Azhar b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān took and she married into them.'

A cursory examination of the extant published writings of al-Hamdānī has failed to bring to light any information on these families, so the author may be quoting from one of the missing volumes of the *Iklīl*.

Al-Ṣaghānī [4] makes the following entry:

'*Al-I'tifād* is that a man locks his door on himself and begs (*yas'alu*) of nobody until he starves to death.'

Abū 'Amr [5] cites:

[1] This prophet is buried in more than one place in south Arabia.

[2] Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī fī akhbār al-quṭr al-Yamānī*, ed. S. 'Āshūr and M. M. Ziyāda, Cairo, 1388/1968, I, 190.

[3] *Sanat al-ḥuṭma = sanat al-shidda wa-'l-jadb* (loc. cit.).

[4] *Al-Takmila*, vol. ed. Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī and Muḥammad Khalafullāh, Cairo, 1971, II, 291 ff.

[5] Abū 'Amr (b. al-'Alā' al-Baṣrī) died in 151 or 159 A.H. Shamir was contemporary with Muḥammad b. Ziyād b. al-A'rābī (died 231/846). So this information was being reported to a Basran philologist as early as the first half of the second century A.H.

I think of[6] a lady saying 'This is a time of *i'tifād*'.

Who is it that survives the *i'tifād*?

Shamir said: Muḥammad b. Ans said: 'It was (their custom) when they suffered severe famine and were afraid they would [starve to] death, to lock a door on themselves and erect an enclosure of bush into which they would enter so as to starve to death'. He continued: 'A man met a girl weeping and said to her "What is the matter with you?" "We are going to lock ourselves up and starve to death", she said.' He continued: 'Al-Naẓẓār b. Hāshim al-Asadī said:

Fate/a time called to them to starve to death,

Starving that rends the unity of peers.'[7]

Shamir said: 'I found it in the book of Ibn Buzurj: "*I'taqada 'l-rajul*, with [the letter] *qāf*, *wa-aṭama*,[8] i.e., he shuts a door on him[self] when in [dire] need so that he might die".'

Nashwān b. Sa'īd (died 573/1117)[9] notes that

Ḥimyar say ''*Affada 'alay-hi bāba-hu*, He '*affada*-ed his door on him(self)', when he has locked it—the *ifti'āl* (form). *Al-i'tifād*, in the dialect (*lugha*) of Ḥimyar, is a man's locking the door of his house (*dār*) without coming out of it, until he dies. They used to do that in the time when grain was cut off from the Yemen in the [famine] years of Joseph, on him be peace, out of haughty disdain (*takabbur-an*) of begging, until two women of them instituted the loan (*sanna 'l-salaf*).

I'tifād was the final resort of those proud tribal people, frustrated and despairing, but unflinching in their resolve to die rather than beg. It is unlikely that the people of Yemeni cities in desperate straits through famine or siege would turn to *i'tifād* and Yemeni histories record that they ate dogs and cats and even occasional cases of cannibalism occurred, as with other peoples in like situations.

Although Nashwān seems to imply that the custom of *i'tifād* was pre-Islamic and he makes a cryptic reference to the introduction of loans, if this is in the literature it has so far escaped me. However, *i'tifād* doubtless was a pre-Islamic practice, but when the Arḥabīs, our own contemporaries, showed me the *ma'fadas*, presumably the site of the death and burial of their forebears, I do not think they were recounting an antique legend but events within relatively recent folk memory.[10] A curious incident quite unconnected with the above, but *en route* to Sūda, took place a little before we arrived at al-Ḥayfa. We met on the track a party of three or four persons returning from a wedding. Muḥammad al-'Ubaydī built a little heap of stones in front of them, later explaining his action as: '*Anā qarda't*, I set up a stone pillar (*qirdā'*, plur., *qarādī'*)[11]'. This laid an obligation on the wedding party to give us some of the food, in fact *laḥūḥ* (pancakes of fermented *dhura*), which they were bringing back from the wedding.

[6] cf. Wright, *Grammar*, II, 217, for this rendering of *wāw rubba*.

[7] *Tāj al-'arūs*, Kuwait, 1390/1970, VIII, 393 seq., reads *zamān mu'tafad-un* for *zaman-un mu'tafid-un* of the *Takmila*, the former to be rendered 'A time in which starving to death had to take place', or something of this sense. The reading of the *Tāj* is the easier of the two.

[8] *Tāj*, loc. cit., *āṭam* for *aṭam*. It looks as if the reading with *qāf* is simply a textual error.

[9] *Shams al-'ulūm*, GMS, XXIV, Leiden-London, 1916, 73. Nashwān was a Ḥimyarī of Jabal Ṣabir behind Ta'izz and it could well be that, in his time, *i'tifād* was only a memory there but survived in remoter districts of the Yemen.

[10] See also J. H. Mordtmann's notes on Glaser's 'Skizze der Geschichte Arabiens', *ZDMG*, Leipzig, 1890, XLIV, 192, 200.

[11] I noted this word as a term for stone pillars of vine trellises in Banī Bahlūl country near Ṣan'ā', with a variant *qirdāl* (1966).

Note

Professor Peter Holt has drawn my attention to R.C. Slatin, *Fire and sword in the Sudan*, London, 1896, 455: "I think the Jaalin [Jaʿaliyyīn], who are the most independent, as well as the proudest tribe in the Sudan, suffered more severely than the rest [in the great famine during the Mahdiyyah 1306/1888–89]: several fathers of families, seeing that escape from death was impossible, bricked up the doors of their houses, and, united with their children, patiently awaited death. I have no hesitation in saying that in this way entire villages died out."